

Influenza Fact Sheet

What is influenza?

Influenza is commonly referred to as "the flu." It is a viral infection of the lungs. There are two main types of influenza virus, A and B. Each type includes many different strains that tend to change each year.

When does influenza occur?

Influenza occurs most often in the late fall and winter months.

Who gets influenza? How is it spread?

Anyone can get influenza, but it is most serious in the elderly, in people with chronic illnesses (such as lung disease, heart disease, cancer, or diabetes) or those with weak immune systems. Influenza spreads very easily, usually through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person during coughing and sneezing.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear? What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 3 days after exposure. Influenza symptoms can include a sudden onset of headache, fever, chills, cough, sore throat and body aches. Diarrhea and vomiting are not common. Although most people are ill for less than a week, some people have complications and may need to be hospitalized.

How is influenza diagnosed and treated?

Some laboratory tests are available to diagnose influenza; however, doctors usually diagnose influenza from the person's symptoms. Rest, liquids and over-the-counter medicine (e.g., acetaminophen [Tylenol]) are the usual treatments. Some prescription drugs may prevent or reduce the severity of influenza. Aspirin should not be given to children with influenza because of the possibility of causing a complication called Reye syndrome.

How long can a person spread influenza?

The contagious period varies, but probably begins the day before symptoms appear and extends for a week.

Does past infection with influenza make a person immune?

Generally, no. Influenza viruses change frequently, so people who have been infected or given a flu shot in previous years may become infected with a new strain. Therefore, people need to be vaccinated (with either a shot or a nasal-spray vaccine) against influenza every year.

What are the high risk groups? What should they do?

People at increased risk for illness from influenza and who should receive vaccine each year include:

- Adults 65 years of age and older;
- Residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities;
- People who have long-term heart or lung problems, including asthma;
- People who have kidney disease, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, anemia, cancer or weak immune systems, seizure disorder, or other medical conditions;
- Children and adolescents (aged 6 months-18 years) on long-term aspirin therapy;
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season; and,
- All children aged 6-59 months.

In addition, to help prevent the spread of influenza to people in high risk groups, those who live with people in a high risk group and healthcare workers who provide care to high risk patients should also receive an annual influenza shot. Depending on vaccine availability, people aged 50-64 years, and any person (greater than or equal to 6 months of age) who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza, should also receive vaccine each year.

What are other steps that can be taken to prevent the spread of flu?

Good health habits can help prevent the flu. These include covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, washing your hands often to help protect yourself from germs, avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth, staying home from work, school, and errands when you are sick, and avoiding close contact with people who are sick. Antiviral medications may also be used to prevent or treat the flu – talk to your healthcare provider for more information.